

# HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY GRAZE COVER

Planting cash crops into a living, green cover crop prior to terminating the cover crop.



# HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY GRAZE COVER CROPS

Most cover crops can double as a high quality forage for livestock during the early spring or late fall; integrating livestock into crop systems accelerates soil health improvements.

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## 1 COVER CROP SPECIES

**SUMMER PLANTING FOR FALL GRAZING:** Plant warm-season cereal grains such as sorghum sudan and pearl millet in July after harvesting winter grains.

If delaying planting until after mid-August, plant oats and peas. The yield will be lower for the oats, but because warm-season grains tend to be lower in digestibility, the forage quality of the oats will be higher than that of the sorghum sudan or millet. After a frost, the cool-season cereals like oats and barley wilt and discolour, but the forage retains its quality.

**FALL PLANTING FOR SPRING GRAZING:** Cool season cereals (winter wheat, oats, barley, and triticale) are popular for spring grazing. Cereal rye is the best choice if you're looking for a grass that comes on early in the spring, although the forage quality of cereal rye will decline rapidly as it matures.

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## 2 GRAZING

When grazing cover crops, farmers aim to provide nutritious forage AND severely stunt vegetative growth through intentional over-grazing. This is best accomplished through mob grazing or other forms of intensive rotational grazing wherein livestock are confined with small temporary paddocks at high stock rates for a short amount of time.

Animals can be confined using either temporary or permanent fence:

- **PERMANENT FENCE:** Most permanent fence consists of three to five strands of electrified wire. Anticipate installation costs between \$1.50 and \$3.00/ ft.
- **TEMPORARY FENCE:** Temporary fence is a more cost effective option for (1) livestock well trained to hot wire, (2) rural areas and (3) when animals are not likely to cause a threat to human safety should they escape. Typically, only dairy animals are good candidates for temporary fence.

**SATURATED SOIL CONDITIONS:** Allowing animals to graze wet fields can negate potential soil health gains. Wet soil compacts easily; pugging can easily ruin a no-till field. Heavy corn residues will protect the field to some extent but always remove cattle from saturated soil.

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## 3 CAUTIONS

**RESIDUAL HERBICIDES:** Many post emergence herbicides used in corn, and particularly soybean, production prohibit using cover crops established in these fields for feed. See "Herbicide use may restrict grazing options for cover crops" by Iowa State University for more information.

**FORAGE TOXICITY CONCERNS:** Nitrates concentrate in cover crop during cool cloudy conditions to create toxic nitrate levels, particularly in the stem or stalk. Prussic acids can be a concern in warm season annuals after frosts.